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A NORMAN ORIGIN FOR SHAKESPEARE

What 's in a name? petulantly asks Juliet. The answer is, as every student of the subject knows: In some names, very little or nothing, in others, possibly a great deal. The latter seems to be the case with the name of our most distinguished English poet. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as to-day, the name "Shakespeare" unquestionably suggested to the mind of everyone what its two syllabic elements so clearly indicate—military prowess. But the suggestion was then far more obvious than now, for the age was nearer to chivalry, and the phrase "the shaking of the spear" was almost a commonplace as expressing the doughtiness of warriors. Layamon, in his *Brut*, represents the valiant British earls as leaping upon their horses and thus defying the Roman hosts:—

"Heo scaeken on heore honden speren swithe stronge."

The English rendering of Job xli, 29, takes the form: "He laugheth at the shaking of the spear". John Marston, in *Histrionastix*, 1598, writes humorously:—

"When he shakes his furious spear,
The foe in shivering, fearful sort
May lay him down in death to snort";

and John Davies of Hereford, in *Humour's Heav'n on Earth*, 1609, writes seriously:—

"No human power can their force withstand;
They laugh to scorn the shaking of the spear."

Illustrations might be multiplied, showing that the significance of the poet's name could not have escaped his contemporaries.

It is duly noted by the early etymologists of proper names. Thus Verstegan, in *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence*, 1605, under the caption *Of the Surnames of Our Ancient Families*, writes:—

"*Breakspear, Shakspear*, and the like, have been names imposed upon the first bearers of them for *valour and feats of arms*."

And the learned William Camden, who as Clarenceux King of Arms devoted special study to family names, makes the same statement in his *Remains*, 1605. Thomas Fuller, in his sketch of the poet's life, first of all notes that he was—

“*Martiall* in the *Warlike* sound of his Sur-name (whence some may conjecture him of a *Military extraction*), *Histri-vibrans*, or Shake-speare.”

Spenser, Jonson, and others, took occasion to point out that his name did “heroically sound”; the Elizabethan printers felt impelled to emphasize its military significance by the use of a hyphen; and the officers of the College of Heralds embodied this significance in a canting design for the Shakespeare coat of arms, with a crest of the warlike falcon shaking a spear in its talons. The poet himself, no doubt, believed that military prowess was the true, as it was the obvious, origin of his patronymic; and possibly in composing his dedicatory letters to the great Earl of Southampton he felt a mild sense of pride as he signed his name in its most suggestive form—“Shakespeare”.

But that the name originally had this form, or bore this significance, is open to doubt. Some of the early spellings may be cited as pertinent: Saxberd, Shagspere, Saksper, Shakespur, Chacsper, Saxper, Sackesper, Shaxberd. Hence scholars have tried to find the origin of the name in such fanciful sources as “Sigisbert” and “Jacques Pierre”. Mrs. Stopes, in her admirable work, *Shakespeare's Family*, gives up the attempt, saying simply:—

“The origin of the name ‘Shakespeare’ is hidden in the mists of antiquity.”

It seems to have escaped observation that the name is possibly of Norman origin, and that the Shakespeares may have come over with the hordes that followed in the wake of William the Conqueror.

A few weeks ago my friend, Professor George L. Hamilton, called my attention to the fact that a name like Shakespeare's appears in the Great Rolls of Normandy for the year 1195. In a list of mainpernors in the Bailiwick of Oximin, situate in the

diocese of Bayeux, who were owing money to King Richard, we read:—

“Will(iam) Sakeespee r(eddit) c(om)p(utum) de ij m(arcis) p(ro) eod(em) [*i. e.*, pro plegio]. In th(esau)ro v so(lidos) st(er)l(ingorum). Et deb(et) i m(arcam), viij so(lidos), iiij d(enarios).”¹

This entry may be translated as follows:—

“William Sakeespée renders account for two marks on the same score [*i. e.*, as security for some person]. In the treasury five shillings sterling. And he owes one mark, eight shillings, and four pence.”

Three years later a return from the same bailiwick notes that William Sakeespée had made “no further payment” and was still indebted to the crown for the sum recorded in 1195:—

“Will(iam) Sakeespee i ma(r)c(am), viij so(lidos), iiij d(enarios) st(er)lingorum p(ro) pl(egio) Rag. Bladar(ii).”²

[“William Sakeespée, one mark, eight shillings, four pence, sterling, as security for Rag. Bladarius.”]

A careful search through the Rolls yielded no other allusion. Possibly William Sakeespée had already left the diocese. There is, however, a reference to a Roger Sakeespée in a neighboring diocese.

In printing the Norman Rolls, Stapleton points out that their chief value will be “to enable each descendant of a family of Norman origin readily to trace out the locality or epithet from which his surname is derived”. The appearance in these Rolls of a William Sakeespée clearly indicates the possibility, if not the probability, that the poet’s family, like so many distinguished English families, came from across the Channel during the rule of English Kings over northern France. If this be the case, exactly when the Shakespeares settled in England is not clear. The name, however, does not appear in the *Domesday Book*, 1086, in which William the Conqueror listed the taxable inhab-

¹ *Magni Rotuli Scaccarii Normanniæ*, ed. Thomas Stapleton, 1840-44, i, 242. I have expanded the abbreviations used in the manuscript.

² *Op. cit.*, ii, 411.

itants of each shire. Indeed, the earliest reference to the family in England, which the well-nigh exhaustive search carried on through many years by hundreds of Shakespearean scholars, expert genealogists, and minute archæologists, has yet discovered, bears the date 1248. The form the name takes is "Saksper", the given appellation is "William", and the place is in Warwickshire, about seven miles from Stratford. The next earliest reference, 1260, gives the name as "Shakespeye", and a third, 1278, as "Sakesper". From this time on the name appears with great frequency in Warwickshire and the adjacent counties. The entries in the Norman Rolls show that about fifty years before the name begins to appear in English records, a "William Sakeespée" was living under English rule in northern France. We find him registered as a debtor to King Richard for a sum which apparently he did not find it easy to pay. We cannot, of course, say that in the reign of this sovereign the Sakeespées migrated to England; but we are reminded of Christopher Sly's humorous boast:—

"The Slys are no rogues. Look in the chronicles; we came in with Richard Conqueror."

As to the history of the Sakeespée family in Normandy I have been able to discover little. The name seems to have been of rare occurrence. It was not unknown, however, in northern France, and the family was not without some distinction, at least at a later date. There is reason for believing that one of these Norman Sakeespées was endowed with "the heavenly gift of poesy". An acrostic at the end of the better of the two extant manuscripts of the important romance *Le Chatelain de Couci*, written in the latter part of the thirteenth or the early part of the fourteenth century, seems to declare that the author is named "Jakemes Sakesep" (*i. e.*, Jacques Sakeespée).³ "Jakemes" is a peculiar Norman form, and the author of the romance unquestionably spoke the Picard dialect. Again, in the year 1408 a Sakeespée was mayor of a village in the north of France,—a man of

³ A second manuscript makes the acrostic read "Jakemes Makesep". See G. Paris, in *Histoire Littéraire*, xxviii, 353, and Ch.-V. Langlois, *La Société Française au xiii^e Siècle*, 1911, 187, 221.

some means and education. To a document, now preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, he signed his name clearly "Jacques Saquespée".

If the name of the English family was originally "Saquespée", or "Sakeespée", it passed through various corruptions—such as were common to English surnames—until it emerged through popular folk-etymology into the thoroughly anglicized form "Shakespeare".

Probably this evolution was largely determined by the Norman pronunciation of the first syllable of the name, *saque* or *sak*, preserving the hard sound of *k*, which in England would promptly identify it with the English word *sak*, a common form of *shake* (derived from O. E. *scacan*). It was natural that, as the intrusion of the letter *h* grew more and more into usage until *shake* completely replaced the earlier forms, this letter would make its appearance in the first element of the proper name we are considering. It should not be forgotten that the earliest form of the name in England is "Saksper", and that this form long persisted. For example, the poet's uncle was entered in the burial register of Snitterfield in 1596 as "Henry Sakspere", and his wife shortly after as "Margret Sakspere, widow, being times the wyff of Henry Shakspere". Since the first element of the name, both in its original form *sak* and in its later form with the intrusion of the letter *h*, suggested the idea of shaking something, the second element *espée*⁴ might readily suggest the modification into "Shake-a-speare",⁵ or "Shakespeare", for in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, under the influence of the allegory and of popular folk-etymology, such was the general tendency of compound proper names.

Possibly this slight modification in sound to make sense was assisted by the meaning of the name in its French form, a meaning more clearly revealed in the spelling "Saquespée". The first element, *saquer*, a Norman variant for *sacher* (derived probably from *sac*), means "to snatch out vigorously"; the second ele-

⁴ Cf. the English variant of 1260, "Shakespeye".

⁵ Cf. the early variants "Shakaspeare", "Shakyspeare", "Shakispeare". The Stratford records commonly refer to the poet's father as "John Shakyspeare".

ment, *espée*, a common spelling for *épée*, means "a sword". Hence the name in its French form had a military significance, "to snatch out the sword quickly".

That this significance was obvious to contemporaries is shown by the fact that in the Norman Rolls the name appears variously as "Sake Espee", "Sake espee", and "Sakeespee". And such an obvious military significance would, in a measure at least, justify the modification, in English terms, to "Shakespeare". We are thus, in conclusion, brought back to the original assertion of Verstegan, that the name was imposed upon the first bearers "for valour and feats of arms".

That the Sakeespées actually migrated from Normandy to England is beyond doubt. In the *Calendar of the Charter Rolls* for 1310 we discover a family with the first names "Ralph", "Robert", and "Simon", and the surname, variously spelled, "Sakespei", "Sakespey", "Syakespeye", "Saxpey", and "Shakespeie"; and Mr. Ernest Weekley observes in his *Surnames*, 1916, that the name "Sacquespee" occurs frequently in our early records. It is further interesting to note the appearance of the name "Drawsword", 1273, an exact English translation of "Sakeespée", along with the curious hybrid form "Drawespee". Was the latter name an attempt, in a bilingual age, to prevent the inevitable confusion of the French word *sak*, to draw, with the English word *sak*, to shake? Still more significant is the appearance of the name "Drawspere", which may be a corruption of "Drawespée"; for although one might easily *shake* a spear, it is hard to understand how one could *draw* a spear.

If on his father's side the poet was distinctively French in origin, on his mother's side he was no less distinctively Saxon, for the Ardens proudly traced their line back to Sheriff Ailwin, Great Guy of Warwick, the Saxon King Athelstan, and Alfred the Great. This enables us better to understand the versatility of Shakespeare's genius, for in him, the most typical Englishman, were combined in full measure the two important race elements that have gone to the making of the greatest of modern nations.

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